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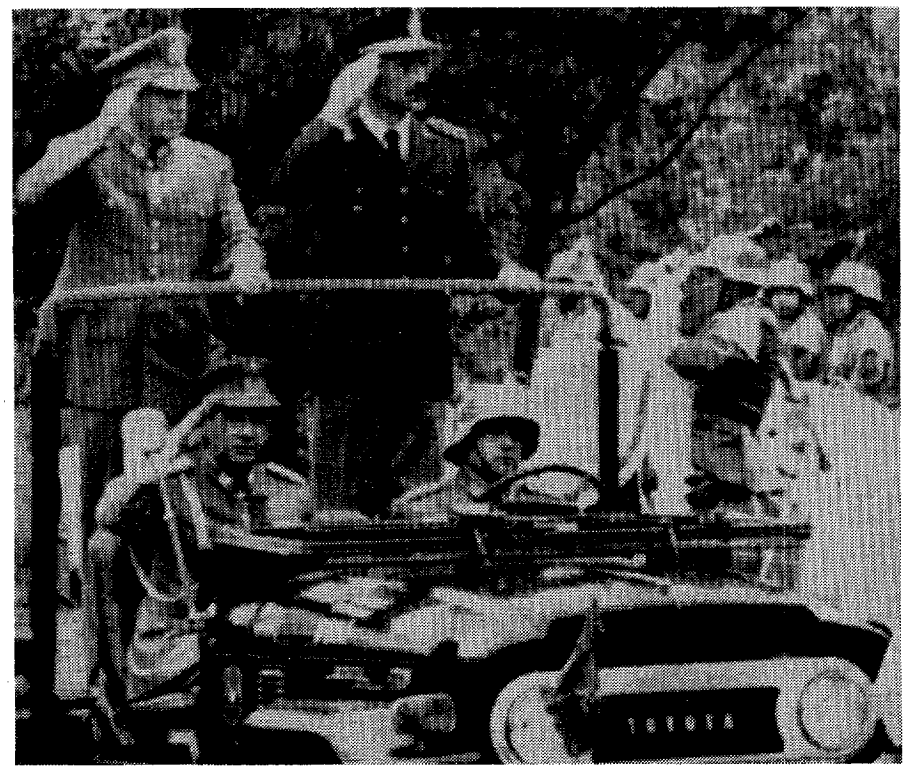
Latin America: The Human Rights Question

The vigorous actions of military governments in South America against real or perceived threats from subversive groups has led to numerous human rights violations in recent years. The abrogation of constitutional guarantees protecting individual freedoms has also focused the attention of church groups, international agencies, and the international press on human rights practices in that region.

Chile has been the main target of this criticism, but heavy attention has also been directed at other authoritarian regimes in the southern cone. The bloody struggle between the left and right in Argentina, resulting in over 1,200 deaths in 1976 alone, is subjecting the government of President Videla to increasingly adverse criticism.

The Uruguayan government has been widely criticized for its mistreatment of political prisoners. The Stroessner dictatorship in Paraguay has ruled with an iron hand for more than 20 years, and its internal security practices have long been a subject of criticism. Less attention has been paid to Brazil in recent months, even though human rights violations still occur there.

As a whole, however, there has probably been a slight improvement in the human rights situation in these countries during the past year. The prospects for further progress are encouraging as long as the full weight of international opinion is brought to bear on the problem. Any US action construed as a threat or reprisal, however, could lead to some backsliding and surely would stimulate more charges that the US is intervening in the domestic affairs of these countries.



Presidents Pinochet (L) and Videla

Argentina

Human rights violations both by the left and the right remain serious in Argentina, but the frequency and scale of abuses by the security forces and by rightist vigilantes has diminished noticeably since the peak last summer. The government now at least issues public lists of those it detains, although the completeness and accuracy of the lists are open to question.

It is difficult to judge how many prisoners have now been released or at least accounted for, since the total number of those arrested is not known. International criticism and investigations of the human rights situation in Argentina have generated considerable irritation among Argentine officials, particularly those charged with putting an end to leftist guerrilla warfare.

Although the armed forces have had marked success against the terrorists, the job is still far from complete. If the guerrillas stage renewed provocations, those in charge of counterterrorist activities will probably push for a return to the brutal roundups of suspected leftists that were relatively common last year. President Videla reportedly has indicated that he expects some worsening of relations with the US over the human rights issue but apparently finds his hands tied by political constraints imposed by hard-line factions within the armed forces.

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